

An anarchist murder mystery

Someone is trying to kill Rask Harp who is dying of AIDS

Barbara Henning

2019

a review of

Long Day, Counting Tomorrow by Jim Feast. Autonomedia, 2017

“Outside across a swath of bay was the Statue of Liberty its torch, like a match head in night’s gutter.”

—from *Long Day, Counting Tomorrow*

Set in the late 1990s, Jim Feast’s *Long Day, Counting Tomorrow* is a sequel to an earlier novel, *phobe*, written by him and Ron Kohn. Both are mysteries involving the same group of anarchist writers. *Long Day*’s main character is Rask Harp, an ex-drug addict, son, brother, poet, friend, occasional prostitute, a young man who is dying from AIDS.

In the last months of his life, while fatigued, coughing blood and running a fever, he and his phobe friends set off to uncover the truth about a doctor who runs an AIDS hospice, the Framing Institute, funded with government money.

Rask is sure the cure is false and that Vesuvius, the clinic’s director, is responsible for his friend, Yardley Chu’s death. While often satirical and humorous, Feast, a frequent Fifth Estate writer, can turn his prose on a dime, swoop around and catch the pathos of his character and the environment.

On Rask, Feast writes:

“He walked down a ways to a chain fence that blocked an empty lot. He was fatigued again. Hooking his fingers through its netting, he lowered himself to the snowy earth, placing the placard Mac had given him under his backside. When he was finally sitting, the coats swaddled over his legs as if turned sideways. One earflap hung like an eye patch, blocking his view. He reset it as he kneaded his bum knee. He looked for the bird again. The bright sky was piled with clouds, which flickered with strange sheens as if laced with cellophane.”

Simultaneous to the Vesuvius mystery, Lolly Pup Publishing is monitoring employees, many of them phobes. While the poets, DJs and teachers struggle to pay their rent, they discover that the Lolly Pup bosses are twisting leftist ideas from Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and Brazilian educator Paulo Friere to coerce their workers into adapting rather than empowering them.

Employees must wear microphones that track their speech patterns to uncover prejudicial attitudes toward corporations. Wear it or lose your job. Neophobes meet at Ringmaster Donuts to plan actions regarding both problems.

The novel is funny and deeply disturbing. With a Rabelaisian touch, Feast lays bare homophobia, and corporate and individual greed.

To read *Long Day* is like joining the AIDS protest march at the center of the novel. We keep losing and finding each other as the crowd expands, moves, stands still, throngs forward. Even your own child or partner slips away and then perhaps reappears. Some, however, are lost forever.

In their efforts to uncover the truth and to thwart the corruption, the phobes—despite their sometimes misguided efforts—continue to fight back. There is a far greater mystery revealed here, about those lost forever. Why are we dying now? Why all this fumbling when there is so much money? What is health care? What is insurance?

One answer comes from the character Yardley Chu's diary:

"Theology is now a substitute for universal health coverage. Instead of insurance, you get assurance that every disease you are likely to get can be avoided by morality and reading the Bible...Instead of hell, HIV infection instead of fire, fever, and instead of Satan wielding a pitchfork, the devil holds an AIDS-soaked prick."

In this historical novel, Feast depicts the social chaos, community energy and despair during the height of the AIDS crisis.

He is an exceptional storyteller, moving fluidly from one conversation to another, fracturing time and space while always moving energetically forward with characters, who even on the brink of death, resist authoritarian maneuvers to control them.

Twentieth century Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes the revolutionary possibilities in the novel as dialogic, the intertwining of a multiplicity of voices that allow new ideas and thoughts to surface.

Jim Feast has certainly pulled that off. The reader is present, too, especially this reviewer. His characters seem so familiar to me, almost as if I might have been at an open reading with them in the 1970s in Detroit or the 1980s in NYC, sitting in the same cafes writing in our notebooks.

After the book's Gay Pride Parade, one of the characters reflects: "The nebula. It looks like that. Like a great circle of interlocked elbows."

Barbara Henning is a novelist and poet, an ex-Detroiter living in Brooklyn. Her Latest novel is *Just Like That*, published by Spuyten Duyvil; **SpuytenDuyvil.net**

fifth Estate

Barbara Henning
An anarchist murder mystery
Someone is trying to kill Rask Harp who is dying of AIDS
2019

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/402-winter-2019/an-anarchist-murder-mystery>
Fifth Estate #402, Winter 2019

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net